Cosmic Care

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As many critics pointed out during the first few months of the still ongoing covid-19 crisis, the pandemic could indeed be seen as merely adding another layer to capitalism’s perversely demonstrable inability to provide the basis for a liveable life. As the indigenous movement The Red Nation stated in mid-March: ‘the crisis has exposed the capitalist system for what it is: anti-life’. As a reaction to the predictable recognition that ‘corporate politicians and billionaires [...] only care about their own power and wealth’, the early months of the pandemic, thus, stimulated various demands for a universal and global care system beyond capitalist exploitation and extraction.

According to a group of academics and activists dubbing themselves The Care Collective, the pandemic crisis was not just the result of new pathogens propagating in human bodies around the globe. It also caused and exposed a manifold crisis of care. Years of neoliberal austerity, deregulation and privatisation debasing and devaluing ‘hands-on’ care work meant that many of the largest nation states were unable to properly cope with the spread, the Collective argued. What was suddenly so urgently missing was not only more and better conditions for ‘hands-on’ care workers, but also care in the sense of an ‘enduring social capacity and practice involving the nurturing of all that is necessary for the welfare and flourishing of human and non-human life’. On this note, the Collective called for a new system of political demand for immortality for all that is mediated by the screen. On the basis of the fundamental impulses of Russian Cosmism, they both attempt to experiment with an enduring capacity for caring for the living; a practice that, embedded within material situations, seeks to provoke speculative and imaginary potentialities.

Seen from a wider perspective, both Staal’s installation and Vidokle’s film engage in the reception of the intellectual, artistic and philosophical tradition of Russian Cosmism, which has unfolded and developed in new experimental infrastructural settings, Vidokle elaborates on a biopolitical demand for immortality for all that is mediated by the screen. On the basis of the fundamental impulses of Russian Cosmism, they both attempt to experiment with an enduring capacity for caring for the living; a practice that, embedded within material situations, seeks to provoke speculative and imaginary potentialities.

In an attempt to respond to such visions of universal care systems, this article will turn its attention to a rather unusual object: Russian Cosmism. As ridiculous and frivolously ill-timed as it may sound at first, I will indeed argue that we seem to need Russian Cosmism more than ever before. I will do this by examining two contemporary (though pre-corona) artworks, Jonas Staal’s installation Interplanetary Species Society from 2019 and the film trilogy on Russian Cosmism Immortality for All from 2014-17 by Anton Vidokle. On the basis of these works, I discuss how Staal and Vidokle actualise past utopian desires in order to draw some inspiring lessons for a contemporary politics of care. Whereas Staal calls for a politicisation of the biosphere in new experimental infrastructural settings, Vidokle elaborates on a biopolitical demand for immortality for all that is mediated by the screen. On the basis of the fundamental impulses of Russian Cosmism, they both attempt to experiment with an enduring capacity for caring for the living; a practice that, embedded within material situations, seeks to provoke speculative and imaginary potentialities.

in the e-flux journal in which he briefly emphasises the contemporaneity of cosmist (an edited transcription of a conversation Arseny Zhilyaev, Fedorov's librarian Nikolai Fedorov in the late nineteenth century) - emerging as a highly multifarious historical tradition. As such a tradition, Russian Cosmism is said to encompass the work and practice of Russian scientists, philosophers, technicians and artists from the late nineteenth century and early decades of the twentieth century. Some, in this group of scientists, reflected on the possibility that the sun might have caused the communist revolution, while others developed visions of space occupation; thus, building the cornerstones for what would later become Russian space science. Moreover, some of these ideas disseminated into the Russian avant-garde in the form of ‘biocosmist poetics’, and further into the post-revolutionary establishment of a transdisciplinary Institute for Blood Transfusion with the ambition of collectivising blood and rejuvenating life. Most often, the Russian cosmistokists took their point of departure from the posthumously publisbed Philosophy of the Common Task written by the Russian philosopher and librarian Nikolai Fedorov in the late nineteenth century. In this book, as media theorist Boris Groys has noted, Fedorov drew the contours of a radical biopolitical project seeking to overcome death. Death was a biological mistake, Fedorov argued, and for this reason a truly common and socially just state should strive towards the immortality of all who ever lived and would live – an aspiration that, naturally, would quickly lead to space constraints and the need to explore other planets.

Our daunting cosmic times and discouragingly sick Earth need truly cosmic answers for sharing and taking care of the living. This seems to be the raison d'être of Staal's and Vidokle’s actualisation of Russian Cosmism. What they share is an attempt to resurrect the central Fedorovian aspiration to ‘live with and for everyone’ and, thereby, engage in the radical shared task of resurrecting and taking care of all humans, animals, bacteria and ‘all other molecular compounds, too’. I propose to term this strange universal ambition a cosmic care for the living. Naturally, Fedorov's hyperbole and dramatic ideas of cosmic care are much weaker today than in the late nineteenth century or post-revolutionary years in Russia, but Staal and Vidokle show us that cosmist need not be a ‘mythological place-holder for an absent, or failed, politics’. As we shall see, they keep alive the desire for a cosmic care; they attempt to organise past utopian desires and speculative imaginaries, and, thus, they simultaneously reflect and epitomise the contradictory function of art as a careful practice. Through and in their works, we are confronted with several questions crucial for any contemporary politics of care within and beyond the field of art: as the notion of (feminised) care historically speaking has most often been considered the exact opposite of (masculinised) political emancipation and empowerment, what would it then mean to put care and concern into the service of emancipation? Are we, really, as the French anthropologist and philosopher of science Bruno Latour seductively would have us believe, forced to choose between an iconoclastic ‘critical barbarity’ gesturing towards the fetishes and abstract structures of capital, and a more concerned form of critique that
aspires to compose and glance at things ‘in great need of care and caution’? Instead of digging myself into a theoretical hole encompassing the usual suspects of influential and congenial contemporary thinkers, such as Latour, Donna Haraway and Jane Bennett, my attention will instead turn to Staal and Vidokle. From Staal’s and Vidokle’s engagement with the historical archive of the futures past of Russian Cosmism, I attempt to examine the contours of a form of weak cosmism from which we might be better able to grasp, or at least grasp otherwise, what it means today to mobilise contemporary social desires involving the nurturing and care of all. If not this, what else should comprise the horizon for contemporary politics?

**Countering the billionaire boys club**

A little more than one hundred years after socialist thinker Rosa Luxemburg’s famous thesis that capitalism would not survive without a non-capitalist outside, it is tempting to con\-firm her assessment – though for different reasons than those her sophisticated analysis pointed to. With billionaire projects, such as Space-X by Elon Musk (co-founder of PayPal and Tesla Motors) and Blue Origin by Jeff Bezos (CEO and founder of Amazon), we are witnessing a new kind of ‘neocolonial, extrac\-tivist, corporatist state’, as Jonas Staal has phrased it. The ‘alternative’ to the ‘inevitable extinction’, as Elon Musk has himself put it, is to become a ‘spacefaring civilisation, and a multi-planetary species’. Cunning as it is, capital is finding ways to assert its powers beyond planet Earth. If the most likely outcome from this situation is the acceleration of the collapse of capitalism, as economic geographer Peter Dickins has stressed, we might also get used to another layer within this mess: a kind of extra-terrestrial billionaire boys club seeking to survive from the planet it has burned up (and through). That Musk, Bezos or some other upcoming trillionaire will succeed in this endeavour within the near future does not escape the real social and ecological effects it will cause.

In the summer of 2019, in Reaktorhallen in Stockholm, Jonas Staal exhibited his Interplanetary Species Society. In an explicit attempt to counter the cosmic billionaire boys club and other ‘terrifying alt-right biosphere[s]’, Staal’s installation aimed to function as an ‘experimental’ and ‘emancipatory biosphere’. Materially speaking, the species society took the form of a huge installation consisting of an assembly of chairs with domes at each side: the first dome exhibited neo-constructivist ammonites – fossil ammonites on top of columns bearing slogans such as ‘COMRADES IN DEEP FUTURE’, ‘HYPEREMPATHY NOW’ and ‘FOSSILS ARE COMRADES NOT FUEL’. The other dome comprised two rectangular posters of plants, arranged beside a red flag – so-called ‘proletarian plantae’. The installation was gathered around a deep hole in which one could glimpse cosmic meteorites. As Staal himself stresses in an e-flux essay entitled ‘Comrades in Deep Future’, the experimental biosphere was much inspired by Alexander Bogdanov’s cosmic novel Red Star, a sci-fi vision of a cosmist-communist utopia on Mars published in 1908. Without neglecting the programmatic and ambiguous nature of this fictive communist utopia (in fact, the novel ends with problems of overpopulation...
and excessive resource extractions, which lead to debate about whether to colonise capitalist Earth), Bogdanov’s Red Star is presented as a critical and historical corrective to the violent colonial vocabulary of Musk and Bezos.

Rather than a nostalgic longing or a simple historicist gesture, Bogdanov’s novel, in Staal’s work, functions as a kind of historical resource from which to mobilise the urgent need to engage with the thinking and building of an alternative biosphere in our contemporary moment.

‘WE DEMAND THE PRESENT’, as a slogan on one of the columns states. Along the lines of this communist trajectory, Staal, inspired by Donna Haraway (the contemporary dialectical counterpart to Bogdanov?), calls for a ‘propaganda art of hyperempathy’: what is proposed is nothing less than another kind of biosphere replacing the pioneer with the guest. Moreover, Staal is inspired by the works of certain Russian constructivists in his consideration of what it might imply to view non-human objects, such as meteorites, plantae and ammonites, not as dead, exploitable matter, but as ‘comrades’.

Characteristic of Staal’s practice, this experimental replacing or substitution has to be viewed as both a performative and organisational task. Resembling a strange mixture of scientific societies, such as the glorious The Royal Societies, a communist party meeting and a cosmic fiction, Staal founded his assembly on 24 August 2019 in Reaktorhallen, with an event involving non-human objects and human academics, scientists, curators and artists. It does, however, not seem unfair to argue that Staal’s concern was less the actual event than the performative assembly itself in the form of the installation.

Installed underground in a former Cold War era techno-utopia topos, a nuclear reactor, the installation could indeed be said to expose the social, material and infrastructural conditions without which any alternative biosphere and material actors would be unthinkable.

In this sense, the installation could be viewed as the cheap and more artistic equivalent to the vast experimental research facility Biosphere 2 in Arizona (which Staal also mentions in the e-flux essay), once under the directorship of the alt-right propagandist and former Trump chief strategist, Steve Bannon. Obviously mimicking not only some of the architectural forms of Biosphere 2, but also its inaccessibility and exclusiveness, literally being underground in a former state-owned research reactor now frequently used for cultural and artistic purposes, Staal’s installation performed – that is, constructed – a counter-hegemonic biosphere. In Staal’s rather compact and airy, almost transparent, infrastructure, what is at the fore is, thus, how any experimental social organisation – however scientific – already prescribes and is conditioned by the ever-present formal aspects, whose political form par excellence is the assembly: in the chairs on which we sit, and the walls surrounding us, we are already partitioned into a social division of labour; configured by certain limits and possibilities, enemies and comrades inscribed in the very

21 Staal, ‘Comrades in Deep Future’. More precisely Staal is drawing on the work of Russian constructivists here, such as Varvara Stepanova, Lyubov Popova and Alexander Rodchenko, and their idea of the ‘object as comrade’. This idea comes from the scholarly work of Christian Kiaer, Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Object of Russian Constructivism, The MIT Press, 2005.

22 Jonas Staal, ‘Assemblism’, e-flux journal, #60, March 2017, e-flux.com; in this text – and in the installation in Stockholm – Staal is inspired by Judith Butler’s idea of the assembly as a performative practice. However, whereas Butler is, first and foremost, focused on the bodily presence of the performative assembly, Staal is much more concerned with the infrastructural conditions rendering a more careful assembly possible. See Judith Butler, Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly, Harvard University Press, 2014.

infrastructure of our – or their – assemblies and experimental laboratories. Staal, thus, reflects on and engages with the question of how to contest and collaborate in a more careful infrastructure. One that replaces the competitive and violent extraction of capital and its personifications with mutual aid and ‘space cooperation’.24

The politics of non-human assemblies
Staal’s installation is unquestionably symptomatic of a much broader trend in the contemporary art world. His work could arguably be viewed along rather similar lines to another political-aesthetic engagement with non-human/human assemblages, such as that of the speculative research group Parliament of Things. In 2018, this group launched the long-term The Embassy of the North Sea project at Stroom in The Hague, much inspired by the thinking of Latour.25 In March 2019, they arranged a symposium entitled ‘Listening to the Sea’ in which they attempted, with the help of hydrophones and underwater noise data, to give things of the oceanic ecosystem a political voice. The ambition was to include non-human actors and extend human rights to phytoplankton, bacteria and hermit crabs as ‘fully-fledged members of society’.26 As in Staal’s installation, the Embassy took the form of a careful gathering of participants (humans as well as non-humans), as Latour would put it, which together came to constitute an assembly.27

24 Staal, ‘Comrades in Deep Future’. With the use of chairs in the installation, Staal, in fact, betrays his own lesson which he stated in 2017: ‘we have learned that using chairs maintains the liberal order that emphasises the sovereign individual above the collective, whereas benches maintain the principle of negotiating and sharing collective space’. Staal, ‘Assemblism’.

25 A notion from Bruno Latour, We have never been Modern, Havard University Press, 1993.


27 Latour, ‘Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?’, 246.
and Staal’s installation strived towards expanding the network of actors, probing the task of ‘making things public’. However, whereas Staal’s installation is propagandistic in nature, The Embassy of the North plans to build a fully inclusive democracy by 2030, with the possible goal of including the Embassy in the EU infrastructure in the form of an office in Brussels. As the Embassy emphasises the inclusion of non-human actors in an already given formal democratic and bureaucratic infrastructure (which could perhaps be supplied with an experimental office?), Staal’s experimental biosphere stems from the premise that it takes form within the ‘terrifying alt-right biosphere in which we find ourselves today’ – to such a terrifying extent that he thought it necessary to, at least temporarily, go underground.

What is foremost in this admittedly rather brief, polemical comparison between the Embassy and Staal’s installation, is the highly conflictual and hostile social context, which none of the formal strategies can evade. The assembly of the Embassy may be viewed as processual, fragile, constructivist and radical in scope and scale. But, from the point of view of Staal’s assembly, the strong emphasis on inclusion, and the diplomatic and juridical form of the Embassy (strictly speaking the embassy as an architectural-bureaucratic form sustains and extends the interests of the nation states) tends to naturalise or, at least, devote great trust to the existing social forms. Ignoring the hostile and increasingly militarised biosphere in which we are all living, arguably also makes it an easy target for the compensatory and recuperated powers of capital. Powers which, after all, show no intention of altering our direction towards catastrophe.

Hence, contrary to the Embassy’s strategy of radical inclusion, Staal’s experimental biosphere is comradely and hyperempathic – though surrounded by capitalist alt-right enemies. Rather than a formalistic bourgeois-like us (as in the brilliantly illustrated case of the EU, which the embassy aspires to be included in), it, thus, produces a propagandistic us vs. them. On the shoulders of past emancipatory movements, Staal attempts to construct new collective, cultural and artistic forms that engage and propagate – hence propaganda – in a much broader social struggle against (fossil) capitalism and its increasingly fascist derivatives. Of course, such a position is open to critique: just as the performative gap between humans and non-human agents can arguably be viewed as a generic and rather empty gesture, the propagandistic exertion can perhaps, for some, appear too performative, as a kind of desperate and left-mimicking act of the Bannon-like alt-right repertoire. However, not only do we need to be aware here not to fall into a dubious liberal critique presupposing a Habermasian ideal of a herschafts-freie Dialog, we also need to acknowledge that this us is far from homogenous. Rather, it is built around multiple and precarious socialist visions of new forms of living inscribed within the ‘morphological vocabulary’ of experimental biospheres, assemblies and even so-called training camps. Staal’s installation could, thus, be said to highlight that we do not need to choose, as Latour compels us to, between performing...
a (Marxist) critique of capital and other forms of oppression, and a careful composition or assembly of objects.\textsuperscript{32} What dispels such a false choice is the attention to the infrastructural and formal conditions always already (re)configuring any form of social organisation.

**The heritage of Cosmism**

During the period of Staal’s installation in Reaktorhallen in Stockholm, multiple screenings of Anton Vidokle’s *Citizens of the Cosmos* took place in the exhibition. On the surface, however, this alignment seems rather odd. As another manifestation of the interest in cosmic ideas in the contemporary art world, Vidokle’s film is pervaded by similar obscure and speculative demands, as present in Staal’s installation. However, compared to Staal’s highly politicised propaganda art of hyperempathy, Vidokle’s work strike as somewhat more hesitant and perhaps even reticent in terms of stance to contemporary politics.

This is not least the case with his film trilogy *Immortality for All* from 2014 to 2017. In these ‘scientific-popular-films’, as he himself terms them, exhibited several places, such as Tranen in Copenhagen, National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Seoul and YVZ Artists’ Outlet in Toronto, Vidokle tells the story of Russian Cosmism.\textsuperscript{33} The films present montages of quotations recited in Russian by Vidokle (and others), and images of actors and people living in the various areas of the former Soviet Union, such as Kazakhstan, Siberia and Crimea. In the two first films, panorama-like images are shown of the post-Soviet landscape of industrial architecture: pylons surrounded by mountains, Lenin statues and Muslim cemeteries. Occasionally, from a bird’s-eye perspective, the historical distance between the Russian cosmists and our time is supplemented with a certain form of visually produced spatial wideness, which bears some striking similarities with the Soviet director Alexander Dovzhenko’s famous film *Earth* from 1930. However, whereas the characters of Dovzhenko’s *Earth* are almost annoyingly glancing towards the future throughout the film, the anonymous people of Vidokle’s ‘scientific-popular-films’ seems haunted by the words of the cosmists, which they recite in a severe, convincing mime.

Compared to Staal’s installation, Vidokle’s films appear almost surprisingly historical, and some critics have indeed identified the trilogy as an ‘intellectual history project’.\textsuperscript{34} This, however, does not result in an aestheticisation of a forgotten and obscure intellectual tradition in a kind of compensatory utopian act, which would, at best, reflect the historical distance to our contemporary ‘capitalist realism’.\textsuperscript{35} Reluctant to convey any direct actualisation, Vidokle retains a historical distance, and is, therefore, questioning and perhaps even illuminating cracks and fissures in our disastrous present from afar. This historical gap is further reflected in the absence of any direct translations of the relation between his or others’ recitations of obscure quotes taken from Fedorov or Russian scientist Alexander Chizhevsky, and the images portraying the contemporay post-Soviet landscape with people bathing in a river and riding horses.

\textsuperscript{32} Bruno Latour, ‘An Attempt at a “Compositionist Manifesto”’, 475.


\textsuperscript{34} Alma Mikulinsky, ‘Resurrection After All: Russian Cosmism as an Intellectual History Project’, *Tohu*, 18 June 2019, tohumagazine.com/article/resurrection-after-all-russian-cosmism-intellectual-history-project.

Frayed as it may sound, Vidokle’s visual historiography is, in this sense, close to Walter Benjamin’s historiographical reflections. Instead of a direct historical translation, Vidokle keeps open, much more than Staal, the dialectical thresholds between past utopian futures and our contemporary moment with the hope that it may result in new forms of the Benjaminian ‘now of recognisability’. Perhaps even more than Benjamin, Vidokle explores this threshold in a very practical and material sense. According to Vidokle, he first stumbled upon the Russian cosmists when Boris Groys told him about cosmic ideas about the resurrection of the dead on spaceships, and Bolshevik experiments of prolonging life through collective blood transfusions. The blood experiment, in particular, epitomises a central feature in Vidokle’s trilogy. The post-revolutionary establishment of the Institute for Blood Transfusion was led by doctor, philosopher and co-founder of the Bolsheviks Alexander Bogdanov. The institute was built around the cosmist idea of slowing the ageing process, or perhaps even obtaining immortality by transfusing blood from the young to the elderly – a practice that in a modernised version is, in fact, now offered by certain blood clinics and allegedly taken up by another PayPal co-founder, Peter Thiel, who dreams of living to the age of 150.

Bogdanov is almost absent in Vidokle’s films, but his biopolitical and somewhat mundanely utopian and material ambition of collectivisation and rejuvenation is materially expressed in the trilogy. All of the films begin with Vidokle addressing the viewer in Russian as a patient. In the first film, This is Cosmos, a kind of introduction to Fedorov’s ideas, the viewer is successively exposed to a red-light ‘irradiation session’, a form of treatment accidentally developed by NASA with the result of speeding up the healing of skin wounds in the zero gravity in outer space. The second film, The Communist Revolution was Caused by the Sun, begins and ends with clinical hypnosis used for the treatment of different addictions. In the film, the hypnotised voice executed by Vidokle himself ultimately induces the viewer to follow the road to eternal life. In the third film, Immortality and the Resurrection for All!, Vidokle uses a discovery made by MIT: that flashing light in the range of 40 hertz has a medical effect on brain cells; for instance, reducing the loss of memory in the treatment of Alzheimer patients. In this way, Vidokle’s films materially and physiologically reflect and manifest the impulse of the cosmists in a kind of materialist determinist gesture. One particularly radical view of this materialist determinism, which is the pivotal point of Vidokle’s second film, was elaborated by Chizhevsky, who, for several years, examined the correspondence between solar activities and social revolutions, such as the October Revolution in 1917.

**Cosmic screens**

Borrowing a well-known trope popularised in the twentieth century from Walter Benjamin to Jacques Derrida, we might, thus, speak of what could be termed a weak cosmism, pointing to two interdependent things: cosmism as a spectre encapsulating our contemporary longing for a universal (or cosmic) care system,
Anton Vidokle, still from *This is Cosmos in Immortality For All: A Film Trilogy on Russian Cosmism* (2014-17). HD video, colour, sound; Duration 28:10 mins. Russian with English subtitles. Courtesy of the artist.

Warning: this video may improve your health

Anton Vidokle, still from *This is Cosmos in Immortality For All: A Film Trilogy on Russian Cosmism* (2014-17). HD video, colour, sound; Duration 28:10 mins. Russian with English subtitles. Courtesy of the artist.
and cosmism in a very practical and material sense, as in Staal's meteorites, ammonites and proletarian plantae. In this context, rather than actually healing the viewer, what we might term Vidokle's vulgar-materialist impulse, at least as much, expresses the idea and desire of immortality.

Viewed thus, the threshold between futures past and present not yet fully recognised could be perceived as taking form inbetween images obscurely chanting Fedorov's utopian demands for immortality and the almost banal medical and material strategies of red light, hypnosis and flashing light at a certain frequency. Here, Vidokle is questioning the lines between the (techno-)utopian and the mundane – a perhaps not that insurmountable divide between demanding immortality and viewing a film. The cosmic utopian ethos to ‘rejuvenate, cure, heal, improve health, and delay death for as long as possible and by any means possible’ is, thereby, transferred to the screen as a cosmic, therapeutic and, perhaps even, medical medium. As novelist Kim Stanley Robinson has noted, space travel does indeed propose itself as a sheer ‘luxury problem’ today, and, for Fedorov himself, as Vidokle observed, was just a practical solution to the problems of overpopulation caused by the resurrection of the dead. Seen as such, forcing the viewer to turn their eyes away from an already overheated biosphere and onto the screen, should not necessarily be viewed as a call for ignorance, as we are usually told. As the screen has increasingly become the inevitable condition for any social struggle, Vidokle reflects on and manifests how the digital fluxes and interfaces could be seen as the means and practical solution to a hyperempathetic stance; a medium through which a caring attitude in a vulgar-material sense is practised. After all, such practices and desires become less and less rare.

During the first weeks of the corona outbreak in the US, it achieved its most patriarchal and passive-aggressive version in American televangelist Kenneth Copeland's attempt to heal television viewers from covid-19 by asking them to place their hands on the screen. Vidokle's films manifest this reverse terraforming of cosmic strategies and processes on screens, taking care of blood and molecules entangled as they are in an expansive biopolitical visual economy already ‘reformatting the human mind’ in digital fluxes. ‘This is cosmos’, Vidokle tells us in Russian with images of the Muslim cemeteries in Karaganda in Kazakhstan, former landscapes that under the Soviet Union were populated by political prisoners, such as Chizhevsky.

Taking at face value the ambiguous line between the utopian dream of immortality and its more material, mundane execution present in Vidokle's films, the demand for immortality might, then, not be as obscure as it first sounds. We all know the daunting numbers displaying unequal mortality rates. For billions of people living in the chaos of today's algorithmic and biopolitical form of governmentality mediated by the laws of capital, the dream of immortality would perhaps amount to just 70 liveable years – and this is not to mention the other forms of increasingly
impoverished and obliterated lives occupying much of Vidokle’s attention in the trilogy. As a result of the corona outbreak, we experienced the increasingly crucial function the screen plays in this algorithmically controlled biosphere pervaded by contagious pathogens. Long before the virus had even peaked in the US, it became possible to glance at the contours of what writer and activist Naomi Klein dubbed the ‘New Screen Deal: the high-tech, Silicon Valley giants who did all they could to profit from the virus ‘in the name of fighting the virus’. From the point of view of Vidokle’s films, we can easily see how such initiatives are indistinguishable from the experience that the precondition for screen capitalism is that some lives are more highly valued than others. However, in the midst of these multiple disasters, the utopianism of the dreams and demands of the cosmists, which Vidokle’s films obsessively circle around, not only manifest how horrible the situation is, but also how much there is to be done. The parodic mimicry of the techno-utopian desires displayed in the attempt to endow a certain frequency of light with a demand for immortality might here carry a certain un-spectacular truth: that it is in the material and mundane, day-to-day hyperempathetic practices that immortality (that is, a liveable life) is hidden.

Contrary to the way public health care institutions tend to appropriate art – as a kind of ‘too careful’ cultural Band-Aid detaching the sickness and the cure from its social context characterised by hyper-individualisation, privatisation and economic cuts in public health care funding – Vidokle’s historical and reflective approach complicates any form of instrumentalisation. The films not only expose their viewers quite materially but also question and open, not least by virtue of the absurdity and obscurity of the cosmist ideas, the historical terrain to different forms of engagement in rejuvenating life and delaying death. Similar to the work of Staal, cosmism functions hence not so much as ‘an imaginary solution to real problems, as a real problematising of how to navigate the differences between the imaginal that corresponds to each particular labour point of view’. Rather than a mere historical analogy or a mythological place-holder, cosmism comes to function as a kind of historical reservoir from which to engage with some of the fundamental contradictions of our time. That is, as a weak historical tradition only surviving as long as practices pursuing other forms of caring and collective life forms persist and endure. In this light, we may reflect on Vidokle’s question towards the end of the first film: ‘and if all energy is truly indestructible, where is that energy now?’ This question is posed after having dubbed the Russian Revolution ‘applied Cosmism’, a social experiment allegedly canalisling the energy of the cosmos. Thus, where did cosmism go? And what does it mean to be a cosmist today?

The contradictions of care
As historian and social reproduction theorist Tithi Bhattacharya noted at the beginning of April, the global propagation of the pandemic clarified that ‘care work and life-making work are the essential work of society’ – not capitalist ‘thing-making’ work. A few days later, Bhattacharya, together with the rest of the Marxist Feminist Collective, called for a de-commodification and public availability of all care work. Rather than speculate on how...
care workers might be seen as the truly contemporary cosmonauts, I will end with a rather short note on how the demands of life-making work expose and challenge some contradictions and critical potentials within the art world. In doing this, one soon has to acknowledge a rather simple fact: we certainly do not seem to lack art practices complying with the (privately funded) expectations of top-down organised inclusions of works of art in hospitals or Latourian instantiations desiring to make things public, often in a far too careful parliament of things. Critical attentiveness and carefulness are exactly what ideologically and materially speaking is expected from the aesthetic sensibilities of art. To acknowledge that art is entangled within a post-Fordist economy of affect, continuously producing the wounds and despair to be cared for, must, therefore, be one of the starting points of any reflection on care in the art world.52 The expectation is art practices that ‘repair and heal broken social situations’; art that does not hurt too much.53 In this sense, one could easily talk about a certain jargon of care in the art world. Care is obviously just as much the problem as it is the solution. To put it bluntly: art is, ideologically and materially speaking, expected to be careful and attentive, perhaps even healing, but no radical political-aesthetic struggle would ever survive without care, intimacy and mutual aid. Experimenting and identifying ways to tackle and deal with this contradiction, without obliging ourselves to a false Latourian choice between critical destruction and careful composition, might be one of the most urgent tasks of an emancipatory (and cosmic) engagement with care.

With this in mind, what makes the works of Staal and Vidokle interesting, and what justifies a certain comparative view, is the way they historicise the politics of care within a broader tradition of social struggle. Within this context, they elaborate, very concretely, even vulgarly, we might say, on what art critic and curator Maria Lind in a review of Vidokle’s first film terms ‘soft mobilisation’.54 In fact, one could arguably see this notion appropriated in a very literal manner in Vidokle’s most recent film Citizens of Cosmos in which cosmists go out on the streets singing. Rather than flirting with a nostalgic vision of an avant-garde gesture igniting or curing the masses, the strength of such images lies in their ambiguous combination of softness and mobilisation, carefulness and antagonism, without resolving their contradictory relationship. Perhaps the exposition of these images, as well as the urge to use watchwords and slogans, such as ‘Immortality for All’, and in the case of Staal’s installation, ‘HYPEREMPATHY NOW’, should not just be viewed solely as expressions of the cosmic desires layered in the longstanding tradition of emancipatory struggle. Rather, these art works show us, too, that cosmism today is mostly true in its anachronistic exaggerations and obscurities.55 Which simply means that we still have so much to fight for. Still a cosmos to win!

52 For some aspects on the ideological mediations of ‘art as care’ see the already noted, Phillips, ‘Too Careful’. For some valuable reflections on the mediations of love and care in immaterial capital in the operations and functioning of post-Fordist forms of labour, see Brian Kuan Wood, ‘Is It Love?’, What’s Love (or Care, Intimacy, Warmth, Affection) Got to Do with It?, e-flux journal & Sternberg Press, 2017.


55 This is a paraphrase taken from Adorno’s ‘In psycho-analysis nothing is true except the exaggerations’, Theodor W. Adorno, Minima Moralia: Reflection on a Damaged Life, Verso, 2005, 49.

Anton Vidokle, still from The Communist Revolution was Caused by the Sun in Immortality For All: A Film Trilogy on Russian Cosmism, 2014-17. HD video, colour, sound: Duration 33:36 mins. Russian with English subtitles. Courtesy of the artist